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SUBJECT: QUBAD TALABANI: A PRETENDER TO THE THRONE

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert S. Ford
for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D). Information in this
cable may be subject to the Privacy Act and should be
reviewed before any release.

¶1. (C) Summary: In a long conversation on May 22, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) representative in Washington and President Talabani's younger son Qubad Talabani assured PolOff that Prime Minister al-Maliki's cabinet was more competent than former Prime Minister Ja'afari's, and requested Embassy's support for ministers like Bayan Jabr and Husayn al-Shahristani. Talabani also earnestly assured PolOff that President Talabani and the PUK had completely withdrawn its quiet support for former Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Chalabi, but warned that Chalabi would continue to seek power in the new government. Blaming the ongoing split between the two main Kurdish parties on the senior Politburo members and bureaucrats, Talabani asserted that Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leader Masud Barzani and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan leader Jalal Talabani were the only ones capable of strategic vision. Talabani then went into lobbyist mode, chiding the Embassy for not doing enough to promote development and foreign direct investment (FDI) into the Kurdistan region. Although he is seeking political advancement in Kurdish politics, the PUK's traditional aversion to dynastic succession indicates that Qubad Talabani's position in the party is wholly dependent on his father's influence. End Summary.

Maliki's Government Will Be Fine

¶2. (C) Qubad Talabani, Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) representative in Washington and President Jalal Talabani's younger son, told PolOff on May 22 that he was feeling fairly upbeat about the new government. In contrast with the concerns of other Kurdish politicians, Talabani asserted that Prime Minister al-Maliki's cabinet was far stronger than former Prime Minister al-Ja'afari's. Although he admitted that Khudair al-Khuza'i was a bad choice for Minister of Education, Talabani said that for the most part al-Maliki's ministers are more competent and professional. (Comment: Dawa Tanzim member al-Khuza'i has railed against the Coalition in the past. After the raid on the husseiniya in the Hayy Ur district of North Baghdad in March 2006, al-Khuza'i publicly accused the U.S. of deliberately killing Muslim worshippers during their prayers, ignoring the fact that his armed men in the building were holding a hostage. End Comment.) Talabani pointed to new Minister of Oil Husayn al-Shahristani. Although Talabani laughed that he personally disliked

Shahristani, he stated that Shahristani would bring some much-needed competence to the Oil Ministry.

¶13. (C) As for Bayan Jabr as Minister of Finance, Talabani claimed that Jabr was a good man at heart who needed the support of the U.S. in order to succeed. He impatiently waved aside the Jadriya Bunker issue as unfortunate, but "water under the bridge." (Comment: Jabr's leadership of the Interior Ministry, never considered very strong, was called further into question when news broke of the Jadriya Bunker, a secret prison where tortured prisoners - primarily

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Sunni Arabs - were found on November 15, 2005. Although Jabr has publicly denied allegations that any prisoners were harmed, a separate Iraqi Government report confirms evidence of torture. See septel.)

Chalabi - Down But Not Out

¶14. (C) Talabani earnestly assured PolOff that President Talabani and the PUK had completely withdrawn its quiet support for former Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Chalabi. According to Talabani, President Talabani had been the last major political figure to defend Chalabi, but finally split with him after Chalabi continued to support Ja'afari's bid for Prime Minister against SCIRI's Adil Abd al-Mahdi. Talabani reported that President Talabani felt betrayed by Chalabi, and that Chalabi's decision to accompany Ja'afari to Turkey to discuss - among other things - Kurdish issues deepened the rift. "You can bank on it that my father will not change his mind on

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this," claimed Talabani.

¶15. (C) Talabani reminisced that he used to go to a gym in Baghdad in 2003, posing as a reporter to gain access, to talk to locals about various politicians. Whenever Chalabi's name came up people used to literally spit with hatred, he said. Talabani said that there is not one group in Baghdad who trusts Chalabi, which is unfortunate given his competence and analytic ability. Talabani laughingly wondered how Chalabi would bounce back from this setback, and stated that he viewed Chalabi as a political survivor from whom everyone could take lessons.

Split between the KDP and PUK

¶16. (C) When asked how the real integration of the PUK and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) is progressing, Talabani said that relations between the two senior leaders (Jalal Talabani and Masud Barzani, respectively) had never been better. Both men shared the capacity for a strategic vision, and a common goal for Kurdistan. They have known each other since they were young men, and despite their disagreements and rivalries respected each other's strength and position. Talabani even suggested that Barzani and Talabani had carved out a modus operandi of "good cop, bad cop" - Barzani would push Iraqi leaders for more gains for the Kurdistan region, while Talabani would either disclaim any ability to control Barzani or would try to cajole concessions as a "neutral" mediator.

¶17. (C) The problem lies with the next layer down, claimed Talabani. The politburos of both parties still had a "Cold War mentality" of distrust against

each other. Speaking for his own party, Talabani said that senior members such as Noshirwan Mustafa and Kosrat Rasul had never been fully comfortable with merging the two Kurdish parties and regional governments. Talabani suggested that the solution was to wait for the first generation of ex-peshmerga fighters and senior Kurdish politicians to retire.

Need More Economic Support

¶8. (C) Talabani then went into lobbyist mode, chiding the Embassy for not doing enough to promote development and foreign direct investment (FDI) into the Kurdistan region. "I'm working on strategy to lobby for this on the floor of Congress," Talabani warned. Talabani noted that he would be going to Sulaymaniyah on May 24 or May 25 to meet with Saudi Sheikh Walid bin Talal to discuss potential foreign investment. (Comment: It's unclear whether Talabani meant actually meant Saudi Prince Sheikh Walid bin Talal rather than Sheikh Walid al-Ibrahim, who is the owner of the Al Arabiya television network. End Comment.)

Comment

¶9. (C) Qubad Talabani is the second son of Jalal and Herro Talabani. He is in his mid-30s and married to an American citizen, Sherri Kraham. He is fluent in English and Kurdish. As the KRG's representative in Washington, he claims he works for the parties, not his father. Talabani incorporates many empty catchphrases in his conversation. For example, in regard to Kurdish disappointment over al-Maliki's government, Talabani responded that one must be positive because "optimism is a force multiplier." Later, when PolOff pressed Talabani to explain a recent article of his warning the West that Kurdistan reserved the right to independence, he asserted that "Kurdistan will never secede from Iraq; Iraq will secede from Kurdistan."

¶10. (C) Despite his youth, his family's connections have given him a place in Kurdish politics abroad. Many PUK members privately tell us, however, that Talabani's future in the PUK is questionable as the PUK is wary of appearing to be a tribal patriarchy like the KDP (which has been run by one family since its inception.) Qubad Talabani is not considered one

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of the heavy hitters in Kurdish politics, and is wholly dependent on his father.
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